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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 000835

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: ECUADOR: PUBLIC DISGUSTED WITH POLITICIANS

REF: A. QUITO 781

[1](#)B. QUITO 805

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney. Reason 1.4 (b&d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: President Gutierrez missed an opportunity for conciliation after the opposition failed to turn great crowds out for the protest strike on April 13. His recent intemperate statements led the opposition to court (and nearly attract) PRIAN support for a new, blatantly partisan proposal. Ultimately, the PRIAN backed out, after Gutierrez threatened to fight any such resolution "to the death." In disgust, thousands spontaneously joined night protests against the government, and more are expected tonight. We are starting to hear disconcerting noises of divisions within the Armed Forces. With the situation very fluid here, and given Gutierrez' current tone deafness to dialogue, we will make clear to him our concern that any move to dissolve Congress would have grave consequences, and look for opportunities to renew our call on both sides to set aside partisan interests and re-engage in dialogue. End Summary.

Taking the Low Road

[1](#)2. (C) As protest strike actions were petering out on April 13, President Gutierrez inflamed a frustrated opposition with intemperate public remarks. The strike had proven most Ecuadorians were more interested in work than protest, he said in a national address, and the government would not cede to a small minority of troublemakers. Minister of Government Oscar Ayerve, the GoE's point man for dialogue, had earlier been quoted calling the Quito strike a "total failure." These statements had the predictable effect of prolonging street protest action late April 13 and fueled spontaneous overnight protests (police estimate around 4,000 people) again April 14. More (and bigger) night protests are expected April 15.

Opposition Tries (Again) to Capitalize

[1](#)3. (C) The government tried and failed to win any opposition votes (it mustered only 35 in favor) for its "go slow" proposal to terminate the current Supreme Court and select a new one when Congress re-opened on April 14. After Congress adjourned, the opposition reopened the session and made a play for the votes of banana magnate Alvaro Noboa's PRIAN. On offer was a commitment to permit the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) to select new Supreme Court justices, after re-divvying up the membership of the TSE and Constitutional Court among the opposition and PRIAN. The PRIAN flirted with the idea all afternoon, generating frantic media attention, until finally imposing deal-breaking conditions (that the Congress vote on new supreme court justices) at 10:00 PM. At that time, middle class citizens of Quito spontaneously turned out in the thousands to peacefully express frustration and disgust with the government, banging pots and pans while chanting "Fuera Lucio." When radical Quito councilor (ID) Antonio Ricaurte attempted to join the throng, he was booed and left. No other opposition politicians attended.

Dissenters in the Military?

[1](#)4. (C) The Quito strike was led by mayor Paco Moncayo, a former high commander of the Armed Forces. Prior to the strike, Moncayo had called publicly on the Armed Forces to cease supporting the Gutierrez government and respect the right of protest (Ref A). On April 14, however, an uncharacteristically agitated Joint Chief VADM Victor Rosero told MLGRP Commander that the Army had become politicized and expressed worry about the unresolved debate in Congress. The ex-military leaders lining up with Moncayo had influence over some active-duty officers, he said. DATT subsequently called Army Chief Luis Aguas to express concern, and was told the Army would respect constitutional order. Later in the day, Defense Minister Herrera publicly reaffirmed the military's loyalty to constitutional order. SOUTHCOM Commander Gen. Craddock also called Adm. Rosero on April 14 to urge the military to exercise restraint and professionalism.

Comment and Embassy Action Plan

[1](#)5. (C) President Gutierrez missed an opportunity for

conciliation in the wake of the unimpressive April 13 strike action (Ref B). Rather than focusing on how to move toward resolution of the court issue, Gutierrez went again with his gut instinct for taking the offensive. We are concerned that in doing so, he could prove all too ready to overstep constitutional bounds, for example by dissolving an uncooperative Congress, if need be. Thankfully, that decision point was avoided after the PRIAN flinched last night, but without a change in strategy, that point could come again. Meanwhile, the nightly protests appear to reflect a new element of citizen outrage, and the military appears to be getting uncomfortable. The indigenous, on the other hand, remain largely absent from protests, at least in the capital.

16. (C) With the situation still fluid and evolving, we see an important role for U.S. Mission activism and opportunities to advance US interests in stability and democratic values in the days ahead. The Ambassador has a breakfast meeting with President Gutierrez on April 18. To the president, she will signal that dissolution of congress and declaring a state of emergency are USG redlines. Having let ex-president Bucaram return, Gutierrez should not permit the PRE to make the situation worse. Instead, the GoE must urgently address the court issue, and deprive the opposition of a rallying point. That would require real dialogue with the opposition and firmness with the PRE. She will also inquire about the status of a rumored Cabinet shakeup, urging he consider a Cabinet more open to dialogue.

17. (C) Separately, the Ambassador plans to call Defense Minister Herrera to build on Gen. Craddock's helpful message, and will call on VADM Rosero early next week. Another opportunity to influence Gutierrez is indirect, through the visit of President Lagos of Chile, April 19-20. We will also suggest to Chile's Ambassador that Lagos counsel Gutierrez against any rash actions.

18. (C) Other Embassy elements have a role to play as well. CG Guayaquil will reach out to opposition contacts there to monitor temperatures and preach conciliation on the coast. MILGRP and DAO will reach out to mid and brigade-level contacts to monitor military views and deployment. RSO is in constant contact with national police to monitor ever-shifting protests. POL will reach out to the opposition in Congress to gauge prospects for renewed dialogue (or confrontation), and counsel moderation to presidency contacts. ECON will emphasize the economic costs of political instability. PD will tap the pulse of the media, and seek opportunities to reiterate our call for non-partisan dialogue.

19. (C) A/S Noriega and other Department officials made democracy points to GOE Ministry of the Presidency on April 15 in Washington. Based on intel we gather and protest actions this weekend, we will offer thoughts on additional ways Department principals could interact with the GOE to reinforce the democracy and stability message.

KENNEY